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ABSTRACT

To explore dominant theoretical influences on parent education, emerging views of child nature and development, and implicit strategies for recruiting parental agreement and participation, this study analyzed "Radio Talk," a 1920s parent education program produced by child psychologists in Minnesota. A qualitative analysis of the transcripts revealed that in the 1920s, parental induction into the new scientific view of childhood was facilitated by heightening self-doubt and self-evaluation, by undermining confidence in intuitive modes of knowing, and by encouraging parents to adopt a scientific epistemological stance. The new view of childhood emphasized its unique and distinct needs, thus polarizing childhood and adulthood. Parents were encouraged to shift attention from physical aspects of the home environment to intangible emotional and relational aspects. Unlike other forms of popular child-rearing advice in the 1920s, Radio Talks were written and delivered by academic psychologists, and thus demonstrate more vividly early attempts to ground expert child-rearing advice in particular scientific ideas, as seen in the incorporation of well-known research, emerging scientific constructs, and an emphasis on cause-and-effect relationships. (MM)

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Constructing the American Child in the 1920's: Radio Programs for Parents

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Introduction and Background

This study is an analysis of Radio Talks for parents, produced by child psychologists in Minnesota as part of a widespread parent education movement in America in the 1920's. Recent interest in the history of childhood has provoked increased attention to the early years of scientific child development research. In the 1920's, philanthropically funded research centers across America began offering a variety of parent education programs, including correspondence courses and radio programs on child development and child rearing issues; these programs were motivated largely by the perceived need for scientifically-grounded parent education to improve the lives of American children (Siegel & White, 1982). Historians have suggested that this widespread dissemination of scientific ideas in child-rearing literature altered our cultural conception of the child and modified family relations in significant ways (Rose, 1990; Weiss, 1978). Previous analyses of advice literature show a shift away from material concerns (e.g., avoiding disease) to more psychological ones in the 1920's; this shift entailed identifying internal psychological processes of development, and included a focus on the importance of early family experiences for a child's later adjustment and success. During this time, psychologists used available theoretical constructs to shape and validate an emerging "cultural construction" of the child (Kessen, 1979) -- a construction founded on belief in the authority of scientific-psychological theories for defining and explaining child development.

Written and presented by psychologists at the University of Minnesota's Institute of Child Welfare, the programs covered a wide range of topics, including the "Native Equipment" of the child, "Modification of Habits," "The Gifted Child," and "Books and Reading." The programs were delivered by several well-known researchers at the Institute, including John Anderson, Florence Goodenough, and Marion Faegre. The purpose of this study was to analyze their content to identify dominant theoretical influences, emerging views of child nature and child development, and to examine implicit strategies for recruiting parental agreement and participation.

Method

A qualitative analysis of the Radio Talk transcripts was conducted, using a "grounded theory" approach (Strauss, 1987). In the first step, open coding was completed. Here, emerging themes for analysis were identified as the material was systematically reviewed. Themes were identified with an eye toward locating theoretical influences and implicit beliefs about child development. That is, in place of a strict content analysis (e.g., Stewart, Winter, & Jones, 1975), an attempt was made to clarify more subtle patterns in the data of defining the child and the mechanisms of psychological growth. In addition, communicative strategies aimed at persuasion were identified by noting recurring phrases, terminology, and modes of description employed by the speakers; these were also analyzed thematically.

All emerging themes were labelled and corresponding passages from the data were recorded for each theme. Each subsequent theme was then categorized as a member of the initial theme, or an example of a new category. Themes were not exclusive; some passages from the data were coded as belonging to more than one theme. Only those themes that were stable and consistently present in the data were retained for analysis. As coding continued, subthemes and connections between themes were identified (e.g., "axial coding" [Strauss, 1987]). Finally, themes were grouped into four categories reflecting the goals of the current analysis, and outlined below.

Findings and Discussion

Analysis focused on four areas; the first three areas reflect emerging ideas about childhood and parenting, and the last area involves identification of rhetorical strategies for recruiting parental participation.

1. Emergent theories of development

The two most obvious theoretical influences seen in the Radio Programs were the ideas of Gesell and the behaviorist theories of Thorndike and Watson. Gesell's emphasis on the 'normal' child is evident in the early programs that present timetables for physical and mental growth; his maturation hypothesis is also apparent in passages describing the "progressive unfolding" of development. In addition, the emerging picture of the "normal child" in the Radio Talks corresponds with Gesell's work in the tendency to equate the 'normal' with the 'ideal' (Cravens, 1985); norms were presented in the context of helping parents to maximize each child's potential.

Behaviorist influences are also seen in explicit descriptions of Thorndike's puzzle box study (11-11-27, pp. 24-26), references to Pavlov's work on conditioning (in a talk titled "The Modification of Emotions, 11-18-27, pp. 30-33), and a summary of Watson's Little Albert study (11-18-27, p. 34). Watson's influence on conceptualizing emotional and personality development can be seen in references to "conditioned love responses" (12-2-27, p. 43), and in the tendency to view personality as a system of learned habit-patterns established in childhood (e.g., "early habit . . . has a pre-eminent place in forming character and personality. . ."[2-17-28, p. 103]). The influence of behaviorism (as well as early Darwin-inspired Functionalism) is also seen in frequent references to the child's "plasticity" ("We sometimes describe this characteristic of the human child by saying that he is plastic" [10-28-27, p. 14]).

The child was characterized increasingly as the site of interaction between native tendencies (Gesell) and learned patterns of behavior (Watson), implying two outcomes: 1) the existence of individual differences due to native endowment, and 2) the determining authority of environmental influence, due the the plastic nature of the young child. Finally, Freudian influences were present (but infrequently). In a program titled "Sex Education," the speaker discussed "primitive sex impulses" which have been "directed into channels of mental interest constituting a source from which man has acquired much power for intellectual effort. . .and social and civic service" (3-17-28, p. 128). Like much of the post-World War I parent education literature, the Radio Talks reflect "the confluence of seemingly disparate schools of thought" (Schlossman, 1976, p. 458) -- seen particularly in the ease with which Gesell's maturational hypothesis was integrated with Watsonian behaviorism.

2. Emergent Themes in Defining the Child

Four trends in describing childhood were identified here: The tendency to polarize child and adult experience, the tendency to interiorize the child (to focus on covert psychological processes), an elaboration of a permeable relationship between individual and environment, and the increasing importance placed on early experience.

Highlighting the distance between child and adult. Gesell's characterization of development as a succession of unfolding stages gave rise to the idea of stage-specific needs and tendencies, and to an increasingly accepted view of the child as psychologically distinct from the adult. Parents were frequently reminded that they possessed insufficient

knowledge of the child's internal workings, and were warned to avoid imposing unreasonable expectations; knowledge of developmental stages was thought to remediate parental expectations, leading to the proper ordering of the environment for optimal outcomes:

> *Our first rule then in training for obedience is that demands be reasonable. Things expected of the child should be based upon what he is capable of doing at his particular stage of development.* (2-24-28, p. 113)

> *To many grown people the play of children is nothing more than a pastime. . .But what many parents fail to realize is that there are specific needs at different stages of development which can only be met satisfactorily by opportunity to play with suitable equipment under satisfying conditions.* (3-30-28, p. 134)

Frequent references were made to an inherent, unavoidable conflict between adult needs and child needs; adequate knowledge of child nature and child development was offered as a way of minimizing that conflict:

> *[C]hildren as well as adults are individuals with minds of their own and their ideas and wishes are bound to get into conflict with the ideas and wishes of the grown people with whom they come in contact.* (2-24-28, p. 110)

> *While we can never bridge the gap from one generation to another, we can from the beginning, determine to know enough of what children in general are thinking, hoping and doing, so that we will not be, from year to year, constantly at odds with our children's plans and purposes.* (2-3-28, p. 96, emphasis added)

Childhood and adulthood were characterized as increasingly distant states; there is little hope, in this account, of direct, unmediated understanding by adults of the child's world. Yet understanding was viewed as crucial for providing the child with necessary age-specific stimulation and learning experiences; what was offered by experts was a mediated, scientific understanding that allowed the parent to respond to the child's needs effectively.

Interiorization and focus on psychological processes. In order to "bridge the gap from one generation to another," an elaborated picture of the internal workings of the child was required. Experts urged parents to shift attention toward hidden psychological processes that were offered to explain seemingly irrational behaviors. The child's repetitive behaviors were explained as reflecting trial-and-error learning; emotional oubursts indicated that the child was "seeking for a mode of adjustment" (11-25-27, p. 40). Attention was directed toward the child's covert psychological motivations:

> *Instead of meeting the energized responses of the child with emotion of our own, let us ask ourselves the question, what is the child trying to do?* (12-2-27, p. 48)

> *[C]uriosity is a manifestation of intelligence. . . .Children have various motives in questioning and all of their questions are not worth while, nor should they be answered. We must determine whether or not the child is playing for attention, is stalling for time, is just trying to keep something going, or really is asking for information. . .*(3-9-28, p. 123)

Repeatedly, parents were reminded that expert interpretation was required to illuminate the complex psychological underpinnings of the child's behavior (see also Cravens, 1985). Parental attention was drawn to complicated inner processes, and to hidden sources of difficulty in the child's environment. Both were seen as requiring expert diagnosis and deciphering.

The permeable individual-environment relationship. The child was seen as an individual possessing unique needs, motivations, and habit patterns (thus converging with American, individualistic views of selfhood [Kessen, 1979]), but the child was also characterized as permeable at the boundaries, highly responsive to outside influences -- "plastic" in nature. Parents were reminded frequently that environments are not simply physical, but include intangible psychological stimuli that traverse the boundary between environment and child.

> *Under the term environment we included not simply the gross physical surroundings of the individual but also the less tangible but equally important factors of care and training, of social contacts, of the examples and ideals which are set before him, in short, all the stimuli, physical, mental, and emotional to which he is subjected in the course of his life. . .*(1-13-28, p. 70)

> *The young child is very much part and parcel of his home environment. In a very real sense, he can be said to mirror the home situation. His difficulties, problems, and modes of response are not exclusively the product of his own nature, but are also the result of the stimulation he is receiving from his environment.* (2-10-28, p. 101)

An emphasis on the permeability and plasticity of child nature was connected to the crucial role played by early experience in determining the course of psychological adjustment.

The determining power of early experience. Since adult personality was viewed as the outcome of various habit systems established in childhood, it was seen as increasingly important to alert parents to the determining authority of early childhood experiences.[1]

> *The study of the problems of youth continually harks back to conditions and influences in the early associations. Failures in adjustment to new situations, poor habits of getting on with people, dislike of responsibility -- all these have roots which must be sought deep in the individual's early history. Since the parents are the first to draw out and condition their children's love, it is to the parent's influence that we must look for setting examples of courage, truthfulness, and sympathy.* (2-3-28, p. 95)

[1] However, in one of the earliest talks (10-28-27) John Anderson warns against placing too much emphasis on the early years: "there is a considerable amount of indirect evidence which would indicate that the child grows most rapidly mentally in the earlier part of his life, then more slowly and finally reaches a point in adult life at which there is little further development. In other words, mental growth roughly parallels the course of physical growth . . . The fact that mental growth proceeds most rapidly in the early periods of life has important practical consequences for us, since it shows that the earlier we can surround the child with a good environment and the earlier we set him an excellent example, the more effective that environment and example are likely to be. Do not misunderstand this statement. At the present time, some workers are saying that the very early period of life is all important and that the final development of the individual is pretty well determined by the age of six, and some even put it at the age of two. But remember, that although children grow more rapidly in the early period of life, nevertheless, individuals can learn and make adjustments at any stage of their life." (p 12)

> *If we could only learn to look at the child. . .and see his present behavior and our handling of that behavior in terms of its end results on adult adjustment, we would be wise and effective parents indeed.* (12-2-27, p. 48)

Increasingly, parental behavior and the parent-child relationship were seen as permeating the child's interior, such that the parental environment shaped and determined the child's future well-being:

> *The wise parent will write into the child's nervous system modes of action and thought which will remain with the child throughout all his life and which will make of him a happy and competent member of society.*[2] (5-25-28, p. 177)

As Kessen (1979) points out, the emphasis on early experience is a hallmark of early (and much contemporary) child development theory. The tendency to highlight its determining power supports identification of patterns found elsewhere (e.g., Weiss, 1978) of assigning complete responsibility to parents (particularly mothers) for the child's developmental outcomes.

3. Implications for Parenting

The increasingly complex picture of the child's psychological life and attention paid to the subtleties of the child-environment relationship motivated a new view of parenting. A shift is seen from attending to mere physical surroundings to a concern with psychological issues and with evaluating the adequacy of family relationships. Two themes can be identified that highlight changing expectations for adequate parenting.

Attention to the emotional environment of the home. Parents were repeatedly directed to increase attention to the child's emotional life and to the quality of the parent-child relationship:

> *The family in which the child begins his life has its influence, not alone in furnishing physical care and protection, but in providing the setting and factors which will largely determine his developing personality. . .an understanding of the real meaning of the home is dependent upon our appreciation of the family as a group of personalities adjusting to one another and being affected by one another.* (1-27-28, p. 85)

> *When bed-wetting, or thumb-sucking, or handling of the genitals persists, or recurs, in the child, it is well to look into the conditions of his emotional, quite as much as those of his physical, life. Here we may uncover a state of affairs which has gone unnoticed by the parents. . .*(2-17-28, p. 104)

[2] The notion of inscribing habits into the nervous system was articulated nearly 40 years earlier by William James (1950/1890) in his suggestion that we automatize useful moral habits to minimize the need for unnecessary choice-making: "The great thing, then, in all education, is to *make our nervous system our ally instead of our enemy. . .For this we must make automatic and habitual, as early as possible, as many useful actions as we can,* and guard against the growing into ways that are likely to be disadvantageous to us, as we should guard against the plague. The more of the details of our daily life we can hand over to the effortless custody of automatism, the more our higher powers of mind will be set free for their own proper work. There is no more miserable human being than one in whom nothing is habitual but indecision, and for whom the lighting of every cigar. . .the beginning of every bit of work, are subjects of express volitional deliberation." (p. 122, emphasis in original)

Attention to emotional and relationship issues led to a call for expanding vigilance; it became increasingly important to examine and evaluate all aspects of the child's environment and experience, as seen in the following section.

Expanding vigilance toward psychological needs. Parents were encouraged to direct attention toward covert emotional and relational aspects of their child's environment, to diagnose difficulties and identify needs:

> *As modern life grows more and more complex, there is an increasing need of intelligence as to children's needs and interests, and of scrutiny and understanding of the human relationships upon which home life is based.* (1-27-28, p. 85)

Attention was drawn toward subtle, qualitative dimensions of the child's experience, characterized frequently as existing outside the untrained parent's range of perception. In addition, parents were alerted to hidden potential difficulties, and were encouraged to question and analyze the child and the environment:

> *Perhaps. . .the home is an entirely happy one. Even here the experienced person realizes that influences may be at work which are subtly changing and modifying the child's possibilities in ways unrecognized by the parents.* (1-27-28, p. 87, emphasis added)

In addition to scrutinizing the child's needs and relationships, parents were encouraged to examine their own motivations, feelings, and attitudes for evidence of unconscious but "dangerous" sources of conflict:

> *Have you ever stopped to analyze the reason why you became so disturbed when your child is disobedient? Is it because you honestly feel that the child's future is at stake. . .or is it because you are chagrined at having your will flouted?* (2-24-28, p. 110)

> *Do we ever stop to think that the attitude of our children to us depends very largely on our attitudes toward them? . . .Wherever there is misunderstanding there is bound to be conflict, not always open, but always dangerous.* (2-3-28, p. 93)

Adequate development was seen to require constant scrutiny of the psychological state of family members. Vigilance was advocated because it increased the possibility for "understanding," which would reduce conflict. The ideal home was characterized as one in which all family members' needs were met through a constant process of diagnosis and adjustment. It was admitted by experts that perfect choreographing of diverse needs in the family is impossible to realize. Parents were encouraged to move toward that goal, however, through increasing their knowledge and understanding of the child's unique developmental processes. The establishment of unreachable ideals foreclosed the possibility of complete success, thus promoting constant vigilance and leading to increased parental self-evaluation. This is discussed in more detail below.

4. Rhetorical strategies for recruiting parental participation

Previous analyses of child-rearing advice have not examined closely the ways in which experts induct parents into specialized belief systems and epistemological stances. Several

trends can be identified in this advice literature that illuminate the process by which parental agreement and participation were enlisted.

Promoting parental self-doubt and self-consciousness. To advance an alternative view of childhood, it was necessary to undermine confidence in the 'old' or naive view. Frequent descriptions and critiques of 'naive' parenting were offered in the Radio Talks.

> *[Describing a child who has difficulty playing with peers:] When playmates came into her life, she had already been poorly equipped to enjoy them, by the habits of easy distractibility and moodiness which were a natural enough result of the foolish efforts of her parents to satisfy her every craving.* (2-17-28, p. 105)

Critical accounts of parenting behavior functioned to prompt self-reflection and self-evaluation. In addition, experts repeatedly called attention to deficits in parental knowledge, thought processes, and belief systems, with phrases such as "the failure of parents to realize. . ." (12-2-27, p. 46); "What the parent. . .overlooks, is. . ." (1-27-28, p. 89); "If the parent cannot, and he cannot, remember all the experiences. . ." (2-3-28, p. 94); "a state of affairs which has gone unnoticed by the parents. . ." (2-17-28, p. 104), as well as references to parental ignorance (1-27-28, p. 88) and lack of interest in their children (e.g., 2-10-28, p. 98).

> *How early does the child need. . .the healthy rough-and-tumble of the child world? Ordinarily, the parent does not give this much thought. Those whose children have satisfactory playmates are not obliged to, and others are slow in waking up to their child's needs until, perhaps, they have a problem on their hands. Mothers find it hard to believe, sometimes that their two or three year olds are pining for companionship, other than their own.* (2-17-28, p. 103, emphasis added)

Through repetition, expert discourse destabilized confidence in intuitive parental knowledge. An increasingly strong line was drawn demarcating two modes of knowing about children: the intuitive, untrained mode of knowledge and the expert, scientific mode. The former was constituted as deficient while the latter was seen as essential for successful development. Parents were encouraged to abandon their own intuitive epistemology and to replace it with a scientific mode of thinking and problem solving.

Redirecting parental attention: Providing a scientific outlook. Confidence in scientific authority was facilitated by an emphasis on the complexity of psychological processes, and by the suggestion that understanding children required scientific knowledge. Parents were encouraged to view children through a scientific 'lens'.

> *Can we bring our children up in such a way that emotional fixations. . .can be avoided? These are the questions we are seeking to answer. In order to answer them, we must first gain an understanding of the mechanisms involved. To do this we must go back to some experiments performed by a Russian physiologist, Pavlov, on animals many years ago. . .*(11-18-27, p. 32, emphasis added)

Rhetorical devices in the Radio Talks that encouraged a scientific mind-set were the inclusion of scientific terminology, descriptions of research, and an emphasis on investigating cause-and-effect relationships. It was seen as crucial for parents to adopt the scientific framework to facilitate attainment of idealized developmental goals.

Conclusion

In the 1920's, psychologists were incorporating emerging theories of child development to promote the "gospel of child development" (Schlossman, 1981) -- articulating a system of idealized goals for successful parenting. This study demonstrates how parental induction into the new scientific view of childhood was facilitated by heightening self-doubt and self-evaluation, by undermining confidence in intuitive modes of knowing, and by encouraging parents to adopt a scientific epistemological stance. The new view of childhood emphasized its unique and distinct needs, thus polarizing childhood and adulthood. Attention was directed toward complex, internal processes that required expert diagnosis. The child was defined as highly responsive to environmental influence, making early experience crucial for determining the success or failure of later adjustment. Parents were encouraged to shift attention from physical aspects of the home environment to intangible emotional and relational aspects; emphasis on the long-lasting consequences of early experience led to the promotion of increased vigilance and scrutiny of covert conflicts and processes to prevent problems in adjustment.

The Radio Talks are similar to concurrent parenting advice in their uncritical mixing of theoretical perspectives ~~emphasis~~ (Schlossman, 1976), in their emphasis on early experience (Kessen, 1979; Schlossman, 1976) and focus on the scientifically complex nature of the child (Cravens, 1985). These findings also support previous historical analyses of child-rearing literature that focus on the expansion of parental -- particularly maternal -- responsibilities to include "emotional labor" (e.g., Weiss, 1978) -- the relentless vigilance toward hidden potential sources of emotional conflict in the home.

Unlike other forms of popular child-rearing advice, the Radio Talks were written and delivered by academic psychologists, and so demonstrate more vividly early attempts to ground expert child-rearing advice in particular scientific ideas, seen in the incorporation of well-known research, emerging scientific constructs, and an emphasis on cause-and-effect relationships. In addition, this study examines not only the content of child-rearing advice, but also analyzes the rhetorical style and modes of persuasion embedded in the program format, providing a detailed look at the process of popularizing scientific ideas; in doing so, this analysis responds to a recognized need for research on the popularization process (Brim, 1959). As part of a broad effort in the 1920's to translate and popularize expert ideas about childhood, the Radio Talks provide a unique window on a significant moment in the history of developmental psychology.

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